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ABSTRACT

A qualitative research conversation needs to include a critical examination of a study's relational dimension. Excerpts are presented from two doctoral dissertations that discuss the nature of the researcher-participant relationships formed through the studies. The first dissertation, "Beyond the Yellow Brick Road: Educational Portraits of Anorexic Women" by H. Busier (1997), explored the educational experiences of anorexic women to understand the roles of schools in the development and maintenance of anorexia nervosa in some women. The other dissertation, "Among Adults: An Exploration of Adult Student Learning Groups" by Y. Pigeon (1999), observed adult learning groups communicating and constructing stories about their collaborative learning experiences. In each paper, the nature of the researcher-participant relationships formed is essential to the study. (Contains 51 references.) (SLD)

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Re-Examining the Nature of Researcher-Participant Relationships in Qualitative Research

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Through reading, reflecting upon, and engaging in dialogue around ethnographies written by Bateson (1989), Behar (1993), Linden (1993), Myerhoff (1979), and Rose (1989), as well as by examining our teaching and research experience, we developed an acute awareness of the critical role relationship plays during data collection and the process of re-presenting researcher-participant relationships in an "...authentic, but ethical manner" (Busier, 1997, p. 45). As we conceptualized our research methodologies for our doctoral dissertations, we searched for qualitative research literature that might guide and define the role of relationship in research situations. What we found focused primarily on issues around developing rapport, identifying informants, and the ethics of reporting (i.e., the use of pseudonyms, issues of confidentiality, and conditions of participation). While Flinders (1992) addresses relational ethics and suggests three main components of researcher-participant relationships: collaboration, avoidance of imposition, and confirmation, his discussion does not adequately examine the nature and role of the egalitarian researcher-participant relationships which are often formed through dialogue and extensive interviewing in studies using qualitative research methods. We were concerned that without careful consideration of the complexities and intimacy inherent in the profound relationships potentially created through the research experience, our approaches might not adequately/appropriately respond to issues of reciprocity, avoidance of harm, equity, and responsibility to community all of which are important considerations when engaging in qualitative research.

Though some within the realm of qualitative research (see, for example, Denzin, 1994; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Josselson, 1996; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 1994; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1994) have begun to address relational issues such as those of power, the role of researcher, and the importance of attending to a multiplicity of voices, there was still a gap. In an effort to bridge this gap in our own studies, we took a transdisciplinary approach in that we examined relational literature (Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1989; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996; Jordon, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Josselson, 1992), philosophical literature on caring (Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995), and feminist research literature (Behar, 1996; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Cole, 1995; Fine, 1994; Lather, 1994; Maguire, 1987; Olesen, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; Richardson, 1994, 1997; Sandelowski, 1994; Spender, 1985; Usher, 1996), in order to inform our research designs and approaches. Our pursuit of a deeper understanding of relationship's role in research was further enhanced by our ongoing reflexive dialogue before and during our separate studies.

Because it is our belief that one cannot conduct qualitative research without forming some intimate relationships, our purpose is to share experiences and reflections from our qualitative studies, *Beyond the Yellow Brick Road: Educational Portraits of Anorexic Women* (Busier, 1997) and *Among Adults: An Exploration of Adult Learning Groups* (Pigeon, 1999), in order to illuminate the complex reciprocal nature of the researcher-participant relationship and other relational issues. Because we subscribe to the view that " the knowledge that emerges from [any] study, although it is imprinted with [the researcher's] own understanding, [is] also jointly created" (Garrett, 1998, p. 22), we believe that a qualitative research conversation needs to include a critical examination of a study's relational dimension. In order to begin this dialogue, we wish to share the following excerpts from our dissertations which discuss the nature of the researcher-participant relationships formed through our studies, and also invite others to engage in a critical dialogue around relational issues which emerge in qualitative research studies.

Intimate Stranger

The purpose of my study, *Beyond the Yellow Brick Road: Educational Portraits of Anorexic Women*, was to explore the educational experiences of anorexic women in order to understand how schools as social institutions may play a role in the development and/or maintenance of anorexia nervosa in some women. Because my sense it that "[u]nderstanding involves intimacy and equality between self and [other] " (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 101), I envisioned the creation of portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, 1994) as a collaborative effort. Self-disclosure was integral to my study and the rich conversations that emerged from multiple, in-depth, open-ended interviews resulted in "'a true dialogue'" Bristow & Esper quoted in Reinharz, 1992, p. 33), which "built connections and avoided 'alienation of the researcher from the researched'" (James quoted in Reinharz, 1992, p. 33).

Like many feminist researchers, I believe that "people who consent to talk openly about their lives deserve the right to ask the researcher potentially personal questions as well" (Thompson, 1994, p. 22) thus, I entered my four research participants' lives as an "intimate stranger" (Busier, 1997, p. 43). Because of my own experiences with anorexia, I responded to their stories

> in a way that I believe heightened their trust and therefore the integrity of the interviews. Had I approached the interview as an objective observer, I would have been betraying myself and the women who share[d] their life stories with me. (Thompson, 1994, p. 23)

Two of my research participants expressed the sentiment that had I not been "up front" about being anorexic, they would have felt uncomfortable around making the private public. I sensed that there was a certain safety, a kind of comfort in sharing an oftentimes secretive and painful part of one's life with someone whose experiences resonate with and, therefore, serve to validate your own. Like Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994), I became the "companion on the journey, bringing my own story to the encounter, making possible an interpretive collaboration" (p. 12) as I attempted to re-present my research participants' experiences in an authentic, but ethical manner.

As I approached writing each portrait, I reflected upon how I might "...achieve a comfortable balance between revealing too much or not enough about [my research participants' stories] to enable readers to understand [my] work and to share in [my] discovery" (Busier, Clark, Esch, Glesne, Pigeon & Tarule, 1997, p. 167). Thus, throughout my study, I embraced an ethic of care which "...may not be universalizable or quantifiable" (Donovan & Adams, 1996, p. 15) but rather is "...rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings, 1984, p. 2). Each portrait, then, reflects the contention that "There is always more to our stories than we can ever tell, but there is also more to most of our research stories than we customarily reveal" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 422).

Witness

In the study, *Among Adults: An Exploration of Adult Student Learning Groups*, a modified focus group interview or "co-story" (Pigeon, 1996) approach was used to observe how adult learning groups communicated and constructed stories about their collaborative learning experience. This collaborative narrative revealed not only the learning group's chronology of growth, but its characteristics, relationships, and norms as members dialogued and negotiated the creation of their co-story. The co-story method offered a unique way to initiate researcher-participant rapport. Its approach places the researcher in a "one down" (Michrina & Richards, 1996) position when trying to obtain an understanding of the story from the participants' perspective. I entered the relationship with my participants as witness of what was important to them, not as an interviewer controlling the group's interaction. And as I spent extended amounts of time with each group, I found that a relationship of trust was built, and that the power dynamic between us became somewhat symmetrical.

The study's inception and actualization was inspirited by numerous relationships formed and fostered throughout the inquiry. It became evident to me that the research existed within and was dependent upon a relational field consisting of various relationships. Upon beginning this inquiry, I did not fully appreciate Spradely's (1970) statement that "...the foundation for all ethnography lies in the complex relationship between the researcher and his [her] informants" (p. 7). Through trusting researcher-participant relationships, interviews became dialogues, writing was shared and critically analyzed, and more detailed stories were told.

Reciprocity was found throughout the study's relational web. Through observations and interviews, I began to develop a deep appreciation the role research methods played in creating learning situations and opportunities for developing stronger participant relationships. The nature of the relationships I formed with groups and their individual members played an important role in determining the quality of rapport and the ability to negotiate perspectives. The intensity of the relationship or degree of group membership—peripheral, active, or complete, and "intimate relationships" (see Busier et al., 1997) within each participant group was palpable and clearly influenced what members described about their groups (Adler & Adler, 1987). Trusting and respectful relationships enabled participants to openly share personal and emerging perceptions of their group learning experience. Through "private" or intimate exchange, participants and I were able to examine and verify our perceptions through dialogue. Trust and understanding in these open

researcher-participant relationships was critical, as I often had access to sensitive information that did not always pertain directly to the study. I needed to filter what information related to the study and what was shared in confidence. The degree of intimacy shared with each group varied, as did my role within each group, as it was never as simple as being a disconnected interviewer or observer. The relational act of honest and reciprocal dialogue represents the most direct way in which I came to know participants, and to understand adult student learning groups.

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